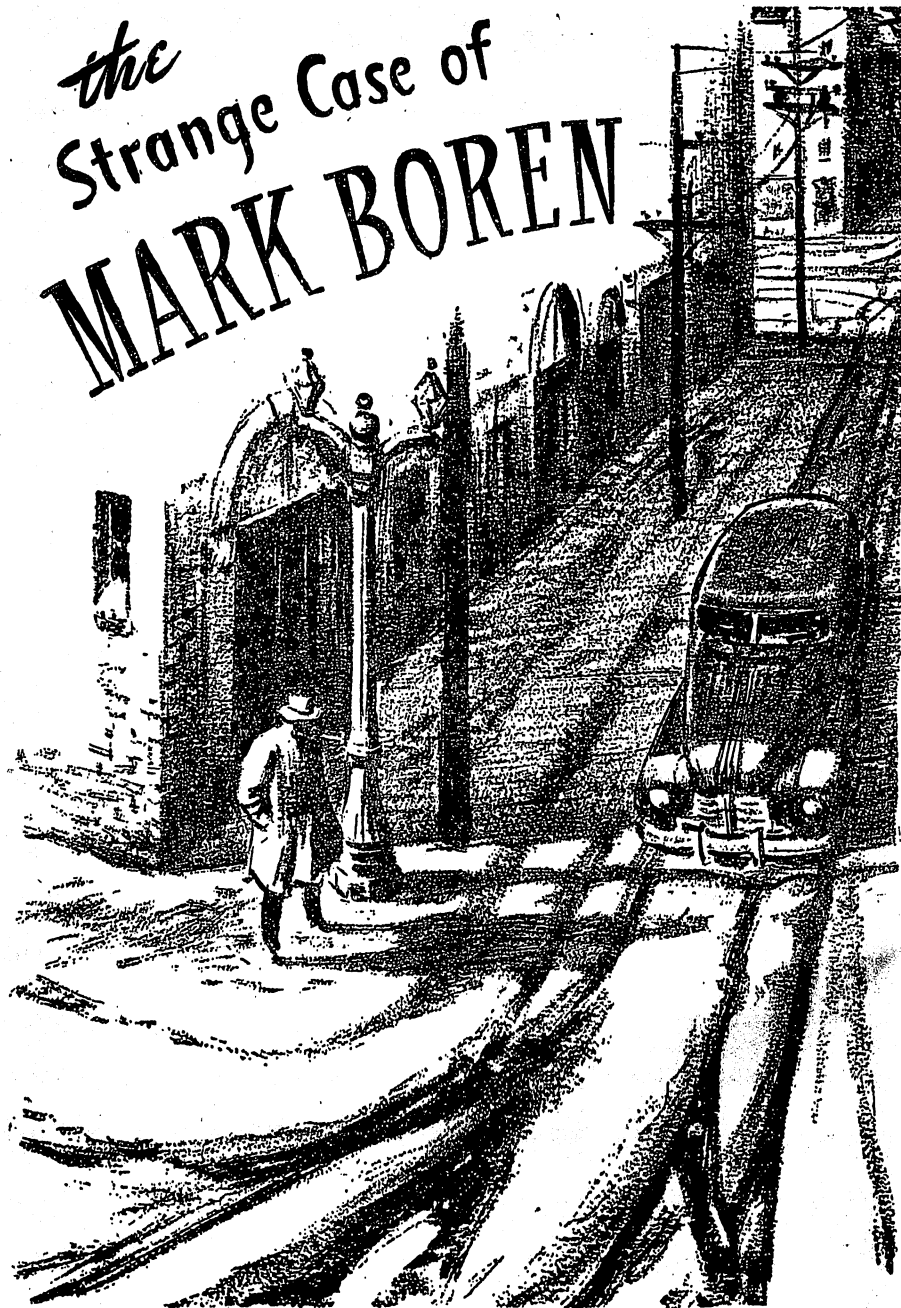


the Strange Case of MARK BOREN



By H. P. Lester

IN THE meanly furnished little bedroom the dregs of daylight were disappearing, like dirty water slipping down a drain. The only sound was the monotonous hissing of the steam radiator under the window—that, and the noise of an occasional passing car in the street below.

Inside the room the only movement was drifting smoke from the cigarette of the man who lay on the bed, his hands clasped behind his head, his feet crossed.

A crumb of hot ash dropped from the end of the cigarette onto the cheek of the smoker. He swore,

brushed briefly at the spot; then he swung long legs over the edge of the mused bed. He moved over to the window and, standing so that he could look out without the possibility of being seen by anyone below, he scanned the street.

An occasional streak of dark polished pavement gave back the early beams of the street lights from between wheel-worn ridges of dirty snow. Two and three story brick buildings hedged in the street and slushy sidewalks.

Mark Boren, born Fritz Merkel, was not interested in the street or the buildings. His regard was on the

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by

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lamp post just beneath the window. A car spun past through the oozing snow, spattering liquescent chunks across the sidewalk, and a man standing beside the lamp post stepped quickly back to avoid the shower. As the car disappeared, he resumed his position alongside the post, hands in the pockets of his tan overcoat, staring straight ahead across the street, as though waiting for someone.

Boren could not see his face; nor was it necessary. He had seen the face. He had seen it the first time a few weeks ago. Walker, the plant manager, had come through, escorting a tall man Boren had never seen before. The man had a pleasant, open face and thin blond hair. He had an easy, almost negligent carriage. Little Walker trotted beside him like a spaniel.

"This is our new jet fuel analyst, Mr. Boren," Walker had said. "Mr. Boren, Mr. Horning."

Horning's light blue eyes seemed to look around Boren rather than at him. Boren stuck out his hand.

"Glad to know you," he said.

"Boren?" the tall man repeated, in a quiet voice. Then he became aware of Boren's hand, and shook it. "How do you do?" he murmured, turned, and he and Walker went on and out of the room.

Walker had returned a little later and mentioned Horning.

"Quite a fellow," he said, lowering his voice. "Officially he's just the routine agent assigned to keep us under his wing. Actually, the word's out that he's by no means just another Bureau man. Quite a fabulous per-

sonage. I've heard stories of his exploits."

"You mean he's FBI?"

Walker nodded, lips pursed in a knowing smile.

"Nothing very glamorous about him, for my dough," Boren said. "Looks like somebody's chief clerk."

Walker looked hurt. "Oh, he's quite a person," he insisted. "I understand that in the Bureau the saying is that Horning never misses."

"Bring 'em back alive!" Boren remarked with a faint sneer. "Will he be here much?"

"You'll see him often," Walker said. "He doesn't say much, just comes and goes, asks a question now and then."

"Why—you expecting trouble here?"

Walker eyed him owlishly.

"One never knows," he said, and turned away toward his own office.

Boren had been at the experimental plant since summer; the summer of atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, of troopships from Europe docking under cargoes of wild, yelling combat veterans in O.D.

Now it was winter—the end of winter. And now Horning was down there in the slush, quiet, blond, implacable, waiting patiently beside a lamp post before the door of Mark Boren's rooming house in the gray dusk of a February Saturday.

Why was he there? What piece of evidence had guided him to this stake-out?

Boren whipped away from the window and began to pace the little room, clenched fists jammed deep in

his trouser pockets, five steps to the wall, five steps back . . .

How had he slipped?

That was easy, that one; he hadn't. He knew that no word or act of his own had tipped Horning.

The radiator hissed and spewed, like something with a secret life all its own. It was stuffy in the room, and he dared not open a window. With a swift gesture he turned off the radiator and the room was silent.

Boren sucked in a quivering breath and struck his fist into his palm.

If not himself, then someone else had slipped. Who?

Not Sakaly. Not Bella Parks. He'd covered himself there. Then how had Horning come straight to him?

Horning never misses.

For a full half minute he made himself stand motionless in the middle of the faded red carpet until the trembling of his body stopped. Then, stepping casually, he moved to the bed and sat down again on the wrinkled spread. He lit a cigarette. Puffing, he leaned back against the footboard and thought, sending his thoughts back along the trail of the months like beagles, sniffing for some scrap of evidence, some overlooked clue.

IT HAD begun with the phone call from Eben Sakaly. That had been June, 1945, and Mark Boren—Fritz Merkel, rather—found himself in possession of a consulting chemical engineer's business that was going nowhere. Going there fast, too, Merkel told himself.

While the war was on, he had made some money. Everybody was making money. But now, with Europe's war a memory, his clients were thinking of reconversion.

Merkel understood very well why and how he had gotten some of this war business. He had gotten it despite certain past unsavory connections of his; because chemical engineers were needed.

But his clients hadn't forgotten. Oh, no. Now they could dump him, and they were doing it as fast as might be. Merkel knew there'd be precious little doing from here on.

The phone call interrupted his reflections.

"Mr. Merkel, please."

"This is Merkel."

"Fritz Merkel? The one who used to live at Third Avenue and Eighty-fifth?"

"Who is this?"

"Remember Eben Sakaly, Fritz?" Fritz did remember him.

An hour and a half later, Sakaly faced him across a table in a quiet hotel dining room. They were on their third round of drinks. Eben, neat and prosperous-looking in a tailored suit and conservative tie, smiled when Merkel finally blurted it out:

"What in hell have you been doing since Pearl Harbor?"

"I've been with the government." He enjoyed Merkel's expression.

"You? You mean—"

Sakaly flashed a metal badge from his palm, and Merkel's eyes widened another fraction of an inch. He whistled. "What in hell . . ."

Sakaly waved a hand. "Nothing to it. They knew all about me, sure. So I gave 'em a few scraps of info, nothing really important, but they thought that was swell. I worked along, keeping my nose clean all the time. I've kept it clean, Fritz— all through the war. I'm a trusted man, now."

He paused and swallowed the rest of his drink. He leaned forward,

"And now," he said quietly, "it's gonna get dirty again." He paused again, smiling. "Pay-dirty, Fritz—but good. That's why I called you. I know how things have been with you. You haven't had your share this last few years, Fritz; I know. Well—" he winked and formed a little circle with his right forefinger and thumb—"you're about to start getting yours."

He silenced Merkel's questions with a raised palm. "This isn't the place to talk. We'll have dinner now, and then we'll go up to my room."

At ten thirty-five, with a drink in his hand, Fritz Merkel leaned back in an armchair in Sakaly's comfortable bed-sitting room.

"Sounds easy," he said, "so long as you can do what you say you can—get me spotted in the plant. Where is it, by the way?"

Sakaly started mixing himself another highball. "Seattle."

Merkel nodded. "That's all right. The farther from New York the better. But—I'll never get away with it, Eben. There'll be Federal agents all over a hot spot like that—jet fuels and what have you. They'll be onto me like bird-dogs the

minute my name turns up on the payroll. I could get routine chemical work, these last few years, sure, but when it came to anything top-drawer—"

Sakaly, comfortable in shirt-sleeves, smiled down at him.

"Precisely. So, you'll be someone else, Fritz."

"What do you mean?"

Sakaly sprawled on the bed. "It's all worked out. There's a brand-new name ready and waiting for you."

"Keep on talking."

"Listen; the guy's dead." As Merkel's eyes remained fixed on his face, he continued rapidly: "Up until 1939 he lived in a little village on the California coast—Trinidad. A sort of a queer duck. He had just one friend in town." He paused, eyes twinkling. "That friend is one of our boys."

Merkel let his breath out. "I see."

"Wait. One day this monkey takes a boat out—something he did often. Well, it was September. That's a bad time of year along there. A quickie blow came up and—he snapped his fingers—"that was all. Now . . ."

He jingled ice in his glass. "Our boy knows enough to give you a life-history up to the date of the drowning; from there on, it's easy. You were washed ashore at a place fifty miles down the coast. We have a contact there who'll swear he picked you up off the beach, half dead . . ." He waved a hand. "No need to go into detail now. It's all taken care of, Social Security card,

draft card, everything."

"How long will I work?" Merkel asked, after a silence.

"Maybe two months, maybe a year. After that, you'll be able to quit and live like a prince wherever you fancy, somewhere outside the U.S.A." He cocked a one-sided grin at Merkel. "And, if you'll take my advice, someplace no one is going to want to mess up, come the next war . . ."

"What's my name?"

"Eh . . . ?" Sakaly turned from the bottle and the ice.

"What's my name?"

"Oh, that!" Sakaly laughed quietly. "Yeah, you really should know, shouldn't you? Well, your name—" he smiled roguishly—"will be Mark Boren."

"That was his name?"

Sakaly nodded. "That was his name."

AT SHIRES-MAKEPEACE, Inc., they were expecting him and glad to see him. Walker, the plant manager, was more than cordial.

"Most obliging of you to come out of your retirement to give us a lift here, Boren. We appreciate it. But I must say that I think you'll find the work interesting; I dare even say, fascinating. We have some most advanced projects in hand here." He dropped his voice a bit. "I'm rather confident that our men are well out in front of any other group working in the propellants field. I want you to see some of the results we're already having with our oxygen mixes. Amazing, I think!"

Fritz Merkel was beginning to feel at home as Mark Boren. He let himself look interested and waited for the little plant manager to run down.

When Walker paused, Boren asked:

"Know where I can get a room?"

Walker became serious. "Well, now . . . I'm sorry about the kind of place you'll probably get to stay in for the time being. Later perhaps, we'll manage to do better. Georgetown is pretty grim. Not at all typical of Seattle as a whole, I'm happy to boast . . ." He twinkled through his spectacles. "Great country, the Northwest, Boren. Ever been up here before?"

Boren shook his head. "I never got north of Trinidad, California, until now."

"Ah! A native son, no doubt."

Boren had the answer for that. "Yes," he said, "I am, as a matter of fact. Born in Visalia, California, August 3, 1910."

"Is that so! You certainly look older than thirty-six, Boren, I must say."

Boren's eyelids flickered. "Family characteristic," he said, after a moment.

"And you were retired at twenty-nine."

Boren shrugged. "Why work if you don't have to?"

"True, true. Well, as I say, we're deeply appreciative . . ."

He was glad to get out of Walker's office. Not that he had said anything. But it was a lesson in the kind of thing he'd be running into all the time.

SOMEWHERE in the house a telephone rang. A door opened, footsteps sounded. The phone stopped ringing and a voice, muffled by distance, conducted a brief, one-sided conversation.

Boren slid off the bed and came carefully to the window.

He looked down.

Horning's tall figure was there, exactly where he had been since early evening. As Boren watched, a hand came out of the pocket of the tan overcoat, a cigarette was inserted beneath the pork-pie hat, a lighter flared briefly. Then the hand and the lighter slid back into the pocket. Horning shifted his feet, looked easily up and down the street, and blew out a long plume of smoke on the quiet air.

You have no business down there, Boren thought, illogically. Nothing's happened to lead you to me; I've handled it to perfection. No mistakes—no errors. You have to have evidence before you stake out on me, and you've got none, Horning. Not from me, you haven't.

Not from me. Well, then, from whom?

Walker spoke truly when he said that Georgetown was not the most attractive section of Seattle. It reminded Boren of a combination of the worst features of, say, a St. Louis red-brick slum and a company town in the Pennsylvania coal country.

But it was not extensive—a mere few blocks of dreary buildings clustered along the main highway running southeast out of town. And

Bella Parks' rooming-house was clean and comfortable, if not elaborate.

When she showed him into the little second-story room overlooking the side street, the clear cool, late-summer sunlight blocked a glowing patch on the worn red carpet. Spotless curtains fluttered across the window, and there was a clean smell of good soap and well-aired bedding about the house, Boren thought.

She stood squarely on her strong legs and gestured to take in the room. "Well, there it is, sir. It's no suite at the Olympic, but it won't cost you nearly so much, neither."

"It's plain enough," he said, non-committally.

"I've a plain house, sir," she returned stoutly. "It's a clean house, too—something you won't find everywhere these days."

Then she dimpled suddenly. She planted capable hands on broad hips and glanced at him. "You'll take it, Mr. Boren. And I'd like to have you. I prefer the gentlemen from Shires' to the run of the aircraft factory workers."

Not bad looking, not bad at all, Boren found himself thinking, in a milkmaid, creamery-and-spring-house sort of way. Her yellow hair was screwed up on top of her scalp in a wispy knot, but she had blue eyes and apple cheeks and a wide cheerful mouth and her sturdy body was well-moulded.

"I'll take it," he said.

That night as he sat in his room digesting a pile of official publications Walker had loaded onto him, there was a knock at the door.

"Who is it?"

The door opened six inches; Mrs. Parks' rosy face appeared in the opening. "It's me. May I come in?"

Boren stood up. "Sure . . ."

Her arms were full of neatly-folded red and black blankets which she hurriedly deposited in the closet.

"I brought you some extra blankets," she explained unnecessarily. "You don't know this country. It may turn off cold any night on an hour's notice. Strangers don't understand that." She paused beside the door. "What part of the country are you from, Mr. Boren?"

"California."

"Oh? What part?"

"Trinidad."

She looked blank. "Oh—I thought—"

"No, not South America—California."

"And you've no family of your own?"

Boren shook his head. "No."

"And what kind of work do you do at Shires?"

Boren stared at her. "Just office work." He pointed at his table. "You see, I brought some of it home with me."

"Oh, you're busy. I'm so sorry."

"No trouble. Thanks for the blankets."

She smiled. "I try to look after my guests."

"Thanks again."

"You're welcome. Good night."

"Good night."

He was sitting down at the table as she said, "Oh, by the way . . ."

"Yes?"

"There's a very nice little cafe down the street and three doors west on the highway. The food's really delicious, and two nights a week they have a little three-piece band if people want to dance."

"Fine. I'll give it a look-in."

"You should." She was closing the door. "I—I have dinner there myself, quite often, especially on the dancing nights."

"Well, that's fine."

"Good night."

He turned back to the reports, frowning.

Bella Parks made no further efforts to ask questions of him in the days that followed. On Saturday night he felt at a loose end and went into the cafe she had recommended. A down-at-heel trio, piano, accordion and saxophone, looking as though they would be glad to play all evening for dinner and some beer, were discoursing featureless music.

As he looked for a table, he heard his name called. It was Bella Parks, seated by herself at a small table near the band.

"Won't you join me?" she said, so enthusiastically that he couldn't refuse her. He sat down opposite her, and a waitress, apparently concluding that two sexes at the same table made it a party, produced a little lamp with a pink silk shade and set it between them. In the soft, synthetic glow, Mrs. Parks looked not unattractive, Boren concluded. He ordered wine for her and beer for himself, inasmuch as the Washington state laws forbade the sale of spirits by the

drink. After the third bottle of beer, he concluded that Mrs. Parks was really quite attractive—definitely so. She was gotten up in a wide black hat trimmed with something filmy and her simple black dress made her seem not quite so aggressively healthy and much more interesting.

They had dinner together and afterward danced. Boren drank a lot of beer and became quite impressed with his own gift for light and airy conversation. Mrs. Parks listened attentively, and laughed a great deal. She squeezed his hand several times under the table and he enjoyed the agreeable sensation of her round sturdy body against him when they were dancing.

The following Saturday afternoon he met her in the lower hallway and asked her if she would join him at the cafe that night and she assented immediately, her eyes dancing.

"Didn't we have a wonderful time?" she said to him as they walked toward her house, late in the evening.

"Pretty good," he agreed.

She squeezed his arm tightly. "Just pretty good?"

He relented and grinned down at her. "A mighty fine time."

She pouted up at him from under the black hat. "You're so grim all the time. You ought to let yourself go a little, have some fun."

"What do you mean by 'fun'?"

She gave an odd little high-pitched laugh, almost a giggle, and glanced up at him again. "Some men have to be told *everything*," she whispered.

His collar felt tight. Somewhere

his voice was telling him "this is asking for it, you fool" and the same voice, much nearer and louder, was saying "Damn it, you're a man, aren't you?"

"All right—tell me," he said, in an odd voice.

"You might start by calling me . . . Bella," she giggled.

"Bella."

"Fritz."

In the darkness just outside the front door she slipped into his arms for a brief moment and he found her lips full and searching. In an instant she was at arm's length in the gloom.

"You know which one my room is," she whispered.

He climbed the stairs with the blood pounding to his finger tips. His hand was on the door knob when it rang in his head like a clanging alarm bell.

She had called him "Fritz"!

Standing stock still in the dark hallway, he fought down the waves of cold panic surging up inside him and forced himself to think fast and clearly.

Certainly *he* had never told her. There was nothing in his room, or on his person, which bore the name of Fritz Merkel, nothing in his wallet with its identifying cards and papers, which he carried always with him.

Had he, perhaps, signed something automatically with his old name . . . ? Had he . . . ?

He could have cried out in the anguish of trying to remember. A rent-receipt?

His face set in the darkness. He marched down the stairs and along the lower hallway. He knocked on her door, and it opened almost instantly. There was her little laugh, and then a whisper, "Yes, darling . . ."

He didn't go in. "Bella."

"Come on in, darl—"

"Bella. I don't feel well. I'm sorry."

"What? Oh, no . . ."

"I'm sorry. I feel—pretty sick. Came suddenly."

He heard her draw a long breath. "All right. I'm sorry, too."

"Bella! I'm—I'm really awfully sorry. Let's—let's take a little trip tomorrow—together. I'll be okay by then."

"All right—Fritz."

THE PASSENGERS from the big sightseeing bus straggled across the paved area to the railings and gaped dumbly at the thundering fall of green-white waters into the rock-filled chasm three hundred feet below the railings.

The driver's megaphone bellowed above the roar of the waters: "You are now looking at Snoqualmie Falls, one of *thee* most spectacular natural marvels in America. You are requested to keep clear of the guard rails . . ."

Bella clutched Boren's arms. "Oh, lordy, isn't it—I mean, well, it's kind of awe-inspiring!"

He nodded. "Some sight," he shouted.

She squeezed his hand. "Gosh, aren't we having fun!" she shrilled.

"Let's get where we can see some-

thing," Boren shouted in her ear. They had walked a little way off from the rest of the tourists. Bella Parks looked back at them. She glanced timidly at him. "Honey, hadn't we better stay—"

"Look at that drop!" Boren shouted. He pressed close to the railings, keeping tight hold of her arm. "Look at her go! Say, there must be a hundred-foot sheer drop here. Look, Bella!"

He thrust his body far out over the guard railing, staring down at the tops of the firs far below them.

"Be careful!"

"Bella, look down there!" He pointed with his free left hand. At the same instant, using his right arm as a fulcrum, he swung Bella Parks powerfully around against the low railing and gave one hard, furious shove.

"Look out! Oh . . ." Her scream high above the thunder of the smoking waters, she fell outward and down, her face, for a split instant, turned back toward him, the eyes fixed on his. The next moment, he was half over the railing himself, in a convincing, fruitless attempt to reach her falling body. Staring down, he saw her strike a jagged rock spur with horrible force; then the limp figure spun off sideways and dropped again to the rocks along the stream.

The shocked, sympathetic tourists led him back to the bus, his face buried in his arms, his shoulders shaking.

He was in her room at the house long before news of the tragedy

reached the other roomers. With gloved hands, working swiftly, he went through the drawers of the little desk. In a pigeon-hole he found a stack of rent-receipts, including one signed "Fritz Boren."

Cursing himself for his stupidity, he crammed the paper into his pocket, tore another receipt blank from a pad of them and, duplicating the receipt as to date and amount, signed it "Mark Boren" and replaced it in the stack.

She had been a nice woman, not too bright, not too stupid. It would have been pleasant to—to have known her longer.

In his own room he burned the receipt in an ash tray.

About eleven o'clock Monday morning, a quiet voice at his elbow said "Tough about your landlady, eh?"

Boren was steady as a rock. He finished writing the line of figures he was jotting, and looked up into Walker's pleasant face.

"Yeah," he said. "I—I—it was horrible. She was an awfully nice woman." He paused. "Know her?" he asked.

Walker shook his head. "One of the other boys who lives at the house told me about it."

Boren let go a tense breath and thinned his lips. "Worst of it is, I feel—well, responsible. If I'd been on my toes, I might have saved her." He stared out the broad window.

"I know," Walker said. "Too bad. Horrible."

He turned and went out. Boren smiled.

AND NOW he was looking out of a window, and Horning was below, and Boren was not smiling.

Because now it was more than two hours since he had awakened from a Saturday afternoon nap in his room, sauntered, yawning, to the window and had known without seeing the face who it was that lounged calmly alongside the lamp post below in the early dusk.

He shivered. With the radiator off, the room had cooled swiftly. Sweat was drying on his body; a sneeze shook him. Blowing his nose, he went to the closet, jerked an overcoat from a hook and huddled into it.

It wasn't Eben. It couldn't be.

He had been at work for a matter of five weeks when the first visit occurred. Things were going smoothly; Walker already had praised his work and hinted of larger things to come, greater responsibility, higher pay. Boren had chuckled and felt oddly flattered. By God! Because Mark Boren was a secret agent didn't mean that Fritz Merkel was any the less a smart chemist. Yes, even a brilliant chemist!

When the buzzer summoned him to Walker's office, he thought, "Maybe I'm to be promoted," and laughed inwardly. He opened the door into Walker's ground-glass-walled office and stalled for one split second in sheer panic.

Then he smiled and stepped into the room. "You sent for me?" he said questioningly, noncommittally.

He gave no more than a single curious glance to Eben Sakaly stand-

ing beside the desk.

It had been easier, of course, because he had known, since before he reported for work at Shires-Makepeace, that he would see Eben this week, somewhere. Somewhere—just not in Walker's own office, was all.

But he was ready for him.

Walker stood up. "Boren, I want you to meet Mr. Sakaly. Liaison and security. He may be around, ask you questions. I wanted you to meet him and know that he's official."

They shook hands. Boren said, "Glad to know you." Sakaly, trig and clean cut in a blue suit and dark silk tie, remarked pleasantly that Walker had been saying some nice things about Boren's work.

Boren gestured deprecatingly. "Well—it's fun. That helps a lot." He pulled out a pack of cigarettes, shook one loose and extended the pack toward Sakaly. "Smoke?"

"Thanks." Sakaly smiled and accepted the cigarette. Boren did not offer the pack to Walker, a non-smoker. He himself reached into the pack, extracted a cigarette. Sakaly stuck the hand holding the cigarette into his pocket. It came out holding a cigarette and a lighter. He flicked the lighter and they both lit up. The original cigarette, Boren knew, now reposed safely in Sakaly's side pocket.

There were a few words of small talk and then Boren excused himself. "Nice," he said to Sakaly, "to have met you."

It had been so easy; just like that. The other cigarettes in the pack were lightly glued together; when you proffered it to someone with the con-

ventional shake, only one came out.

And in December came his promotion. Now he was getting warm—hot; now he was moving into the circle of those who looked at results, who were out on the frontiers of end-products. Ten days later, when Sakaly walked into his own office and exchanged a few casual words, he offered him a smoke with a significant look and a slight nod of the head that carried a touch of pride in it.

There was nothing really hot in that cigarette—yet. But it carried a promise of information to come, information maturing now, at Shires-Makepeace, results which the top men in the place grew slightly gaga thinking about, hoping for. When they were ready, Mark Boren would see them.

"You're doing very well," Eben Sakaly said, casually. "Most of what you've given us so far we know already. But we understand; it takes time."

Boren's voice was confident. "Sit tight. It's coming. I can see it from here."

"I know," Sakaly said. "You're on the ball, Fritz. Our ordnance experts with the armies in Europe," he went on, hardly raising his voice, but with a sudden alteration of manner, "found that the Germans were far ahead of us in some fields and far behind in others."

Boren raised his eyebrows. "I've heard that." He nodded.

IN EARLY February he was moved up again. A week later Eben

Sakaly stepped into his office, took a cigarette, muttered "For God's sake, Fritz, what's holding you up, things are getting hot," and poised beside the door like a nervous animal.

Boren's hands clenched at his sides. "What do you mean?"

"There's something wrong. I don't know what it is. I was told to tell you to hurry."

"I can't hurry the experiments," Boren said. "I've given you plenty of valuable data, stuff that's absolutely new—"

"I know, I know. But the big stuff, the new fuel, the ionosphere stuff!"

"It won't be long," Boren assured him.

"All right. Now listen: I'm going to give you a contact. The instant anything breaks . . ." He named a Seattle telephone number. "Repeat that," Boren repeated it. "Ask for the mail order manager. Got that?"

"Ask for the mail order manager."

"When he answers, simply say 'contact' and give a date, hour and place. Then hang up."

"Right."

Sakaly said "Good luck" and was gone. Boren sat and stared at the papers on his desk. So it was like that. Things might go wrong. And if they did . . .

He was safe unless they got Sakaly. Sakaly was his contact; Sakaly had emphasized that he and only he knew Boren's identity; Sakaly in turn reported to another man higher up, and so on.

But if they got Sakaly, and Sakaly talked . . .

He looked at his neat desk, with

the books arranged across the front of it, the rug on the floor before the door, the easy chair, the potted fern. Shires-Makepeace was a good place to work. He enjoyed his work. He was a good man and he knew it. He had made good here and they liked him. He was making good money and he would make more. And there were the substantial amounts from Sakaly, already a handsome sum, safely stashed in a Seattle bank under another name.

The Pacific Northwest was a pleasant country. Mark Boren had made a place in it for himself. Why give it up?

Once his mind was made up, he felt a wonderful peace. It was so absurdly simple. The tools were all there, ready to his hand.

He made himself allow three days to pass. On the fourth day, during his lunch hour, he called the Seattle number. When a woman's voice said "Hello," he said "Give me the mail order manager." There was a fractional pause and then the woman said "One moment."

Then a man's voice said "Mail order manager speaking."

"Contact," Boren said. "Tomorrow, 9 p.m., my office."

"Good," the man said, and Boren hung up.

He flashed his badge at the guard on the gate at 7:35 the following evening.

"Evening, Joe. Yes, I'm going over to the laboratory for a couple of hours."

"Good deal." The guard stamped his feet in the snow and beat his

hands together. "Take it easy, Mr. Boren."

He worked in the lab until 8:56. Then he swore aloud in irritation. Kersey, one of the young assistants, looked up. "Something wrong?"

Boren pushed back the loose-leaf notebook he was writing in.

"Left a couple of analyses I need in my office. Well . . ." he stood up. ". . . have to go get 'em, I guess."

He walked slowly across the light snow, stepping firmly, making good prints, thought that even the snow was a witness for him, and into the administration building.

Up the stairs, down the dimly-lit hallway.

Eben Sakaly stood up from where he had been seated, in the arm chair, blinking a bit in the light.

"Fritz . . ."

Boren lifted a finger to his lips. He crossed to his desk and faced Sakaly with a smile. He nodded his head, smiling, and formed a little circle with thumb and forefinger.

"You got it?" Sakaly breathed.

"Open that bottom drawer," Boren said, indicating his desk and Sakaly, breath coming fast, bent down. He jerked at the drawer.

Boren's hand grasped a sharp-cornered brass paper-weight.

"It works hard," Sakaly said.

"It sticks," Boren laughed. "Give it a good one."

Sakaly used both hands, and Boren silently raised the brazen weight and crushed its sharp corner into the unprotected bulge of Sakaly's skull, just above the base, with terrific force.

"A good one." He repeated softly.

The impact produced from Sakaly a single low moan in which he seemed to protest the indignity done him. His head fell forward and bumped against the desk; his knees bent more; finally he rested in a posture of grotesque worship, nuzzling the desk, his hands hanging pathetically straight down before him. A little blood seeped from the wound and crimsoned his neck.

Boren laid a finger delicately against one of the man's wrists and waited in the silent office. Presently he made a grimace of satisfaction, picked up the phone, dialed.

"Boren speaking," he said, when Plant Security answered. He made his voice breathless, shrill. "For God's sake come over here in a hurry and bring some men! What? No, it's under control, now, but there might be someone else . . . What? Oh—Room 237, Ad Building. Hurry!"

Taking a little short-snouted .38 revolver from his side pocket, he dropped it on the floor beside Sakaly. Then he went out in the hall to meet the security guards who were pounding up the stairs.

STANDING beside the window in his room, looking down at the patient federal agent in the street, Boren suddenly smiled.

What was he worried about?

He was clean, by God, crisp and clean as a new napkin. Bella Parks was dead, Bella who knew his name was Fritz. Eben Sakaly, the one man who knew who and what Mark Boren

was, was dead a month past, branded as a spy, and Mark Boren the hero who had caught him red-handed and killed him in self-defense, a paper-weight against a pistol.

Horning had nothing to go on, couldn't have. There was no reason, no reason whatsoever, why Horning should be down there waiting for him. If Horning thought so, then Horning was crazy and would find it out. But fast.

Probably—he smiled as it occurred to him—Horning wanted some additional info from him on the Sakaly affair, was waiting for him to come home! Horning was like that.

Whistling, he reached for his hat, pulled on his gloves, went out of the room, and downstairs. Inside the front door he hesitated for the briefest moment; then, grinning cheerfully, he stepped out onto the small porch and down the three steps to the sidewalk.

Horning had turned as the door opened, and the street lamp was full on Boren's features as he stepped down to the street, looking straight at Horning. He saw the agent's eyebrows lift faintly under the hat-brim.

Boren put surprise into his tone. "Hello, there, Horning! What in the world . . . ?"

Horning scrutinized him deliberately. "Hello, Boren," he said quietly. "Little warmer, isn't it?"

"Not warm enough for me," Boren laughed. "The good old summer time!" He was walking away, down toward the highway, as he said it. "Well . . . see you around."

His back to Horning, he stepped resolutely down the slight hill, across the patches of oozy slush. He had gone perhaps one hundred feet when the federal man's voice reached him.

"Oh, Boren. Just a second."

Tingling roots of fear branched briefly through Boren's body. He stopped and turned, looking surprised.

Horning had left the lamp post and was coming toward him at his easy pace, hands in the pockets of his overcoat, face shadowed beneath the pork-pie hat-brim.

Boren stood there, his heart ticking loudly in his ears. Horning reached him and halted. His right hand came out of the coat pocket and Boren's eyes darted to it automatically.

There was a pack of cigarettes in the hand. Horning held them out, shook the pack; a single cigarette detached itself and came free.

"Smoke?"

"Thanks." Boren drew the cigarette out slowly. Horning reached into the pack with his fingers and pulled out one for himself.

"Got a light?"

His eyes on Horning's open, pleasant face, Boren reached for a book of paper matches. He struck one and they both lit up.

"Want a beer?" Horning asked.

Dumbly, Boren nodded. They fell into step and went on down the little hill to the highway-main street where cars with glaring headlights droned along, their tires whining over the slush.

Horning turned into the little cafe.

The three-piece band was on the stand, taking a break. The accordionist was drinking beer out of a bottle.

Horning pulled out a chair. "Have a seat." He himself took the chair across the table, between Boren and the door. He signaled a waiter. "Olympia."

They sipped their beer. Horning sat with his hat on, glass in hand, a faraway look in his eyes.

"I've been meaning to ask you another thing or two about that Sakaly business," he said presently.

Relief flooded Boren like the warmth from a drink. Just as he had figured.

He lifted his glass and nodded.

"Take it away."

Horning swirled beer in his glass. "Too bad, in one way, you handled him so roughly."

"My God," Boren exclaimed, "he had a gun. I did the only thing I c—"

"Sure, I know," Horning nodded.

"Too bad, though. If we'd caught him alive, he might have told us some things."

"You mean," Boren said carefully, "you think he may have had—"

Horning nodded. "Confederates. Yes. Off hand, it looks otherwise, I'll admit. He didn't need any help. He was a trusted man, vouched for

in Washington. It was a perfect set-up. But I've got a feeling. I think there were others."

Boren looked him straight in the eye as he said, "What makes you think so?"

"I don't know," Horning said, "it's hard to say. Ever sail much, Boren?"

"In a boat, you mean?"

"That's right." His voice was lazy. "If you're good you get a kind of instinct—you know the wind's going to shift *before* it shifts. You know she's going to heel over *before* she heels."

"You're—a sailor, then?"

Horning nodded. "Amateur. I haven't sailed since—oh, since 1939. Did my last sailing in California. Little place named Trinidad."

He was standing up, because Boren was on his feet too, on his face a wild, trapped look.

"Of course," Horning said, "I couldn't keep it up after Uncle Sam called on me." He moved to where he was in a direct line with Boren and the door. "Funny sort of job. Hush-hush. I had to fake a disappearance and re-appear under another name. My real name—is Mark Boren. Don't move, Boren, there's a gun in this pocket."

